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ABSTRACT

This bulletin addresses the issue of reporting crimes against juveniles, describing findings from the National Crime Victimization Survey, which gathers information from citizens on crime, including whether and how they are reported. The survey also collects information about characteristics of victimizations, the nature of the incident location, and the incident itself. This analysis discusses the information gathered on juvenile and adult reporting of sexual assaults and thefts. Results indicate that crimes involving juveniles are under-reported in absolute terms and in comparison with adults. This is not explained by the victimization of juveniles being less serious or by the tendency of juveniles to report crimes to school authorities rather than police. Under-reporting is evident even for the most serious offenses. This is partly because juvenile victims are more likely to be victimized by other juveniles, and crimes committed by juveniles are less likely to be reported. Juveniles were more likely than adults to discount their violent victimizations as minor or kid stuff. Juveniles were no more likely than adults to say that they thought the police would not take the incident seriously, nor were they more likely than adults to say that they were afraid of reprisals. Implications are discussed. (SM)

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OJDP
Shay Bilchik, Administrator
November 1999
JUVENILE JUSTICE BULLETIN

Reporting Crimes Against Juveniles

David Finkelhor and Richard Ormrod

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) is committed to improving the justice system's response to crimes against children. OJJDP recognizes that children are at increased risk for crime victimization. Not only are children the victims of many of the same crimes that victimize adults, they are subject to other crimes, like child abuse and neglect, that are specific to childhood. The impact of these crimes on young victims can be devastating, and the violent or sexual victimization of children can often lead to an intergenerational cycle of violence and abuse. The purpose of OJJDP's Crimes Against Children Series is to improve and expand the Nation's efforts to better serve child victims by presenting the latest information about child victimization, including analyses of crime victimization statistics, studies of child victims and their special needs, and descriptions of programs and approaches that address these needs.

The American justice system is in the midst of an effort to evaluate and reform its handling of the criminal victimization of children and youth. Juveniles are unusually vulnerable to crime victimization (Hashima and Finkelhor, 1999), but concerns have been raised about the effectiveness and sensitivity of the justice system's response to these crimes. The findings presented in this Bulletin indicate that a majority of victimizations of juveniles ages 12 to 17 are not being reported to police or other authorities. Even serious victimizations involving weapons and injury are significantly less likely to be reported when they happen to juveniles than when they happen to adults.

A variety of factors may contribute to the underreporting of crimes against juveniles, including adolescent concerns about personal autonomy and fears of being blamed or not taken seriously, family concerns about the negative impact of the justice system on children, and the general perception that nonsexual assaults against youth are something other than real crimes. The justice system may be able to increase youth reporting by emphasizing its interest in assisting juvenile victims, making staff more available and accessible, and countering some of the ideology that inhibits such reporting.

The National Crime Victimization Survey

Some perspective on the extent of the underreporting of crimes against

From the Administrator

Crime shatters the sense of security that is an essential element of a civilized society. Crimes committed against children are particularly disturbing because they involve the victimization of an especially vulnerable—often defenseless—population.

To better serve the needs of these young victims, OJJDP is launching its *Crimes Against Children* publication series. Fittingly, this inaugural Bulletin addresses the crucial issue of reporting crimes against juveniles.

The Bulletin describes the findings of the National Crime Victimization Survey, which was conducted for the U.S. Department of Justice by the Bureau of the Census. Research reveals that crimes against children, too often, go unreported to police or other authorities. Even when weapons and injury are involved, the crime is less likely to be reported if the victim is a juvenile rather than an adult.

The victimization of our children should not remain hidden. The information provided here is vital to safeguarding children and ensuring justice for those who have been victimized by crime. It documents the need to adopt policies and practices that encourage the reporting of crimes against juveniles and that make it easier for these young victims to receive the assistance they need.

Shay Bilchik
Administrator

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juveniles can be obtained from the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), which is conducted by the Bureau of the Census on behalf of the U.S. Department of Justice. The NCVS gathers information from citizens on crimes including whether and how they are reported. It also collects a great deal of information about the characteristics of victimizations (to the degree that the victim can report them), including victim and perpetrator demographics; the nature of the incident location; and a description of the incident, including, but not limited to, type of crime, use of weapons, and injuries to the victim. The active sample contains about 55,000 households and approximately 100,000 individual respondents. Response rates for both eligible households and individuals are more than 90 percent. When data from 1995 and 1996 are combined, information on approximately 32,000 victimizations of all types is available.

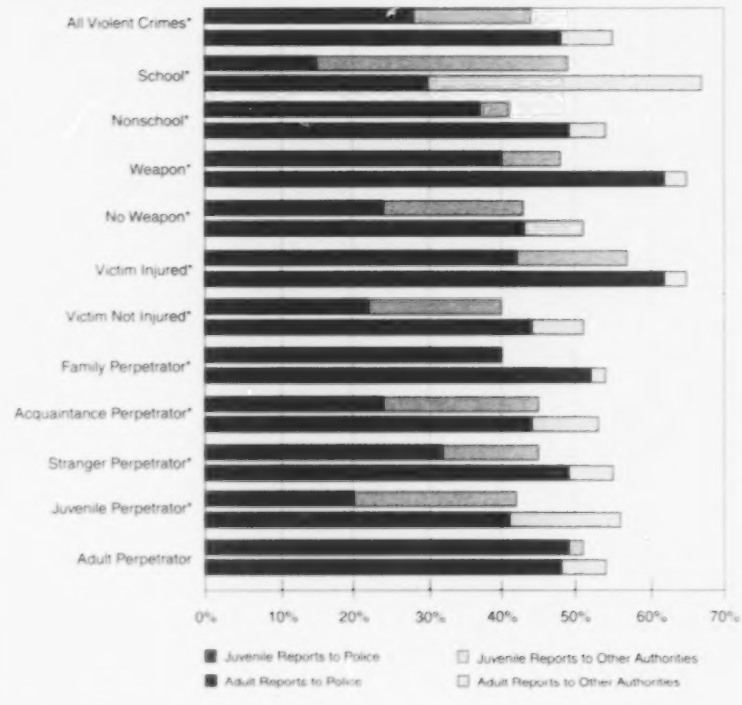
The NCVS gathers data only on certain categories of violent crime (rape and sexual assault, robbery, and assault) and theft. The rape and sexual assault category includes completed and attempted rape, all sexual attacks, any unwanted sexual contact, and any verbal threats of rape or sexual assault. Robbery consists of completed and attempted robberies, with or without accompanying injuries. Assault encompasses all completed and attempted assaults, whether aggravated or simple, and includes verbal threats of assault. Theft includes completed personal thefts, regardless of value, but does not include purse snatching, pocket picking, burglary, or motor vehicle theft. When data are combined from the 1995 and 1996 surveys (the most recent years of accessible NCVS data), information is available on 6,942 violent crime victimizations, 1,684 of which occurred to youth ages 12 to 17 and on 18,296 thefts, 2,826 of which occurred to youth.

Key Points

NCVS data on juvenile crime victimizations reported to police and other authorities indicate that:

- Only 28 percent of violent crimes against juveniles become known to police (see figure 1).
- An additional 16 percent of violent crimes against juveniles are reported to some authority other than the police, mostly school officials.

Figure 1: Reporting of Crimes Against Juveniles and Adults: All Violent Crimes (1995–96)



*Child victims versus adult victims, $p<0.05$.

Note: Adult=18+ years; juvenile=12–17 years.

Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics. 1998. *National Crime Victimization Survey.* Computer file, fifth edition. Survey conducted by U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research.

- Juvenile victims are substantially less likely than adult victims to have their violent crimes reported to the police or any other authority.
- Violent sexual assault, although generally underreported, is one crime that is reported to police and other authorities about as often for juveniles as for adults.
- Only 10 percent of thefts against juveniles become known to police, but an additional 29 percent of such thefts get reported to other authorities, such as school officials.
- High-value thefts (more than $250) with juvenile victims are less likely to be reported to police or any other authority than those with adult victims.
- Juveniles report more low-value thefts (less than $50) to some authority than do adults, mostly to school officials.

Reporting Victimizations

This analysis focuses on the information gathered by the NCVS on juvenile and adult reporting of crime. The initial question asked by NCVS interviewers about reporting is: "Were the police informed or did they find out about this incident in any way?" If respondents answer, "No," they are then asked: "What was the reason it was not reported to the police?" The respondents' reasons are classified by the interviewer, and one of the possible response categories is "Reported to another official (guard, apartment manager, school official, etc.)." It is important to note that the police question can be answered "Yes" even if the victims did not report to police themselves but the police found out in some other way, for example, through reporting by another person. Also when a report is said to have been made to another authority, it means that the incident

was not also known or reported to the police (at least to the victim's knowledge). Thus in the following discussion, the phrase "reported to" is synonymous with "known to" and does not imply that the victim was the reporter, and a report to "other authorities" does not include incidents that were reported to other authorities but then became known to the police.

NCVS Limitations

Information gathered by the NCVS on the reporting of juvenile victimization is limited in some respects. The survey does not collect data on children younger than age 12, thereby excluding an important group of juvenile victims whose victimizations may be particularly underreported. It does not gather information on certain important kinds of juvenile victimizations, such as the nonforcible sex offenses of statutory rape and incest, which constitute a significant segment of the juvenile crimes reported to police (Finkelhor and Ormrod, in press). It may also substantially undercount juvenile victimization for methodological reasons (Wells and Rankin, 1995), for example: the "crime context" in which the questions are asked (youth may be less likely than adults to think of their victimizations as real crimes); the questionnaire design, which contains concepts and formulations that may be obscure to children; and the fact that information from respondents is not gathered in private and youth may be particularly reluctant to disclose some victimizations in front of parents or family. Despite its limitations, the scope and size of the NCVS and its detailed questions about reporting to police and other authorities make it useful for exploring the nature of reporting patterns.

Lower Reporting Rates for Juvenile Victims of Violent Crime

Only 28 percent of violent crimes against juveniles become known to police (see figure 1). A low percentage in absolute terms, it is also lower than the 48 percent of violent crimes against adults that come to police attention. An important feature of juvenile victimization is that nonpolice authorities, especially school officials, sometimes dispense justice for both violent and property offenses. Consequently, a substantial percentage of juvenile violent victimizations (16 percent) get reported to authorities other than the police. Even taking into account other forms of nonpolice reporting, juvenile victimizations still are less likely to be known to any authority (44 percent for juveniles and 55 percent for adults). As might be expected, school victimizations of juveniles are less likely to be reported to police than nonschool victimizations (15 percent and 37 percent, respectively), but more likely to be reported to some authority (49 percent and 41 percent, respectively).

The underreporting of violent victimizations of juveniles compared with violent victimizations of adults holds across most categories of crime, including crimes committed with weapons (48 percent and 65 percent, respectively), crimes resulting in injury (57 percent and 65 percent, respectively), and crimes committed by all categories of perpetrators, including strangers (45 percent and 54 percent, respectively). Violent crimes committed by juveniles against juveniles are particularly underreported compared with violent crimes committed by juveniles against adults (42 percent and 56 percent, respectively), and the underreporting is especially pronounced if only police reports are considered (20 percent and 41 percent, respectively).

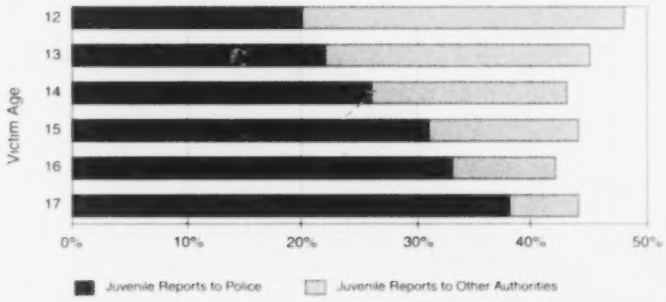
The pattern of reporting varies to some degree with the age of the juvenile (see figure 2). Reporting violent crime to any authority remains at about 40 to 50 percent throughout the adolescent years, but reporting it to police starts at only 20 percent for 12-year-olds and rises to 38 percent for 17-year-olds. The pattern suggests that reports to police of crimes against children under age 12, who are not polled by the NCVS, are even less frequent than for teenagers.

Reporting Sexual Assaults Against Juveniles

The one category of crime in the NCVS that does not appear to be underreported by juveniles compared with adults is sexual assault. Thirty percent of juvenile sexual assaults are reported to police compared with 29 percent of adult sexual assaults (see figure 3). But sexual assault is the most underreported violent crime to any authority for both juveniles and adults.

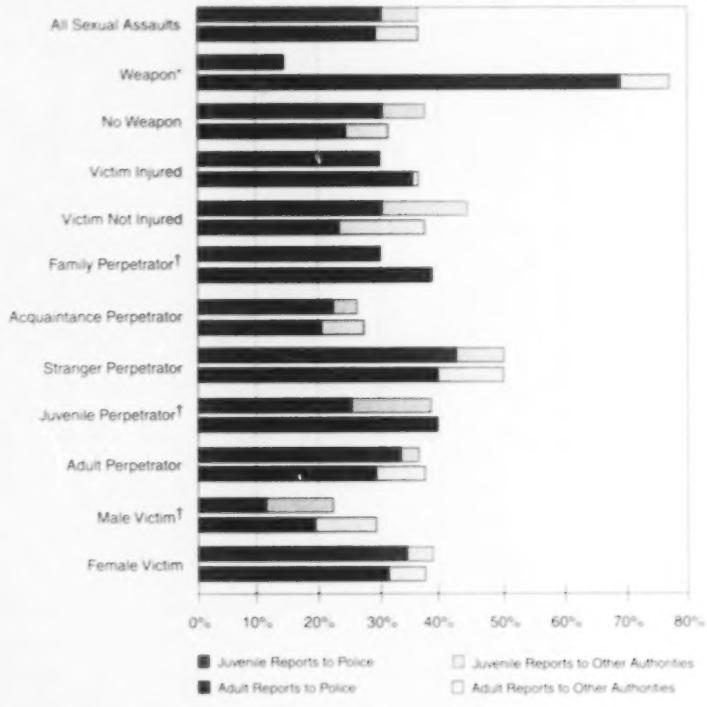
One way of understanding this result is that adults underreport sexual assault more than they underreport other crime victimization to an even greater extent than juveniles. Adults report 55 percent of all violent crimes but only 36 percent of sexual assaults. Juveniles, on the other hand, also report only 36 percent of sexual assaults, but this is more in keeping with their lower reporting (44 percent) of all violent crimes. Several possible explanations exist. First, sexual assaults on children are considered particularly serious crimes, which may counteract the embarrassment and shame that lie behind some of the underdisclosure of this crime. Second, parents, who may be the arbiters of what juvenile victimizations get reported, may be less ashamed and embarrassed to report their child's victimization than adults reporting their own victimization of sexual assault. Third, parents may feel it is particularly important to obtain

Figure 2: Reporting of Crimes Against Juveniles by Victim Age: All Violent Crimes (1995–96)



Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics. 1998. *National Crime Victimization Survey.* Computer file, fifth edition. Survey conducted by U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research.

Figure 3: Reporting of Crimes Against Juveniles and Adults: Sexual Assaults (1995–96)



*Child victims versus adult victims, $p<0.05$.
†Based on too few cases to calculate reliable significance.

Note: Adult=18+ years; juvenile=12–17 years.

Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics. 1998. *National Crime Victimization Survey.* Computer file, fifth edition. Survey conducted by U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research.

medical or psychological assistance (including medical exams and counseling) for child victims of sexual assault, and professionals in these fields facilitate reporting. Finally, a methodological factor may be at work: adults who have not previously disclosed a sexual assault to an authority may be more comfortable doing so to an NCVS interviewer than a juvenile would be, so that a greater proportion of unreported adult sexual assaults get disclosed on the NCVS than unreported child sexual assaults.

Sexual assaults involving a weapon were the one type of sexual assault that juveniles significantly underreported to authorities as compared with adults; these crimes were reported by 77 percent of adults but only 14 percent of juveniles (see figure 3). Although based on a small number of cases, this finding is consistent with juveniles' lower rate (comparatively) of reporting of weapons assaults for all violent crimes (48 percent for juveniles and 65 percent for adults) (see figure 1). One possible explanation is that juveniles and their families may feel particularly vulnerable to retaliation, offsetting the otherwise greater likelihood of weapons crimes coming to police attention.

Reporting Thefts Against Juveniles

Thefts involving juvenile victims are extremely unlikely to come to police attention—only 10 percent do—much less likely than those involving adult victims (31 percent) (see figure 4). But a substantial percentage of thefts involving juvenile victims are reported to other authorities (29 percent), so that when overall reporting (to any authority) is compared, there is little difference between the percentage of thefts involving juvenile victims and the percentage of thefts involving adult victims reported (39 percent and 38 percent, respectively). About 60 percent of all thefts involving child victims occur in school, and a little more than half (51 percent) of these get reported to some authority, compared with only 22 percent of nonschool thefts involving juvenile victims. This demonstrates the importance of school authorities in arbitrating property crimes for children.

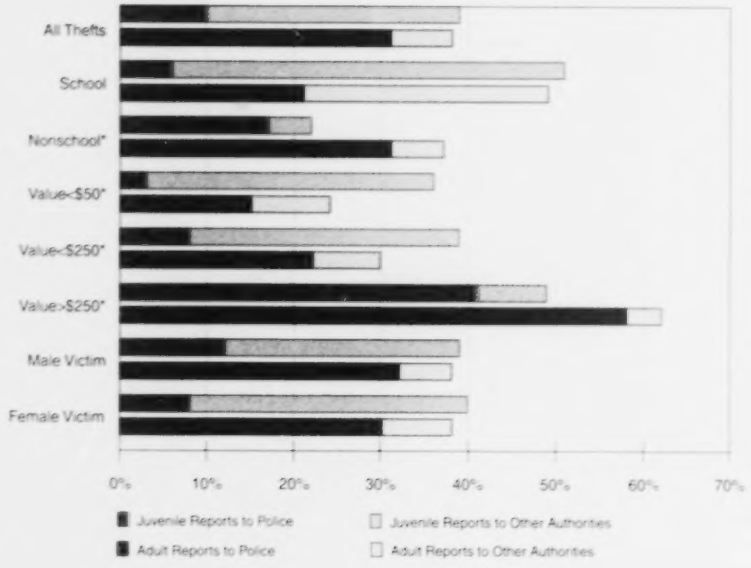
Although the reporting of thefts is generally correlated with the value of the items stolen, with thefts of valuable items being more likely to be reported, reporting patterns change in an interesting way for juveniles. Items of substantial value (more than $250) stolen from juveniles get reported to some authority nearly half the time, but this is significantly less often than the rate for valuable items stolen from adults (49 percent and 62 percent, respectively). The discrepancy is even greater for police reports (41 percent and 58 percent, respectively). By contrast, thefts from juveniles of small value items (less than $50) are actually more likely to be reported to some authority than thefts of small value items from adults (36 percent and 24 percent, respectively). This is explained by the considerable reporting of small value thefts by juveniles to school authorities. Few such reports (3 percent) go to police.

In terms of juvenile victims' ages, the reporting of thefts has a different developmental progression than the reporting of violent crimes (see figure 5). While reports of thefts to police increase from 7 percent to 14 percent between the ages of 12 to 17, reports to any authority actually go through a marked decline after age 14, down to 31 percent from a high of 44 percent. This indicates that older teens are increasingly reluctant to turn to school authorities for justice when their property is stolen.

Discussion

Crimes involving juvenile victims appear to be underreported in absolute terms and in comparison with adults. For violent crimes, this underreporting is not explained by the victimization of juveniles being less serious, as measured by such standards as injury or weapon usage. Nor is it explained by the tendency of juveniles to report crimes to school authorities

Figure 4: Reporting of Crimes Against Juveniles and Adults: Theft (1995–96)



*Child victims versus adult victims, $p<0.05$.

Note: Adult=18+ years; juvenile=12–17 years.

Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics. 1998. *National Crime Victimization Survey.* Computer file, fifth edition. Survey conducted by U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research.

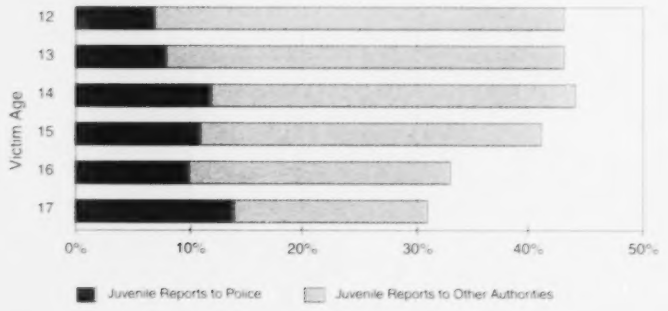
rather than to police. The underreporting is evident even for the most serious offenses and even when taking into account reports to other authorities. Part of the explanation is that juvenile victims are more likely to be victimized by juvenile perpetrators, and crimes committed by juveniles are less likely to be reported. However, this is not a complete explanation: in a multivariate analysis not shown here, even when controlling for juvenile offenders, juvenile victims were still associated with underreporting (Finkelhor and Ormrod, 1999).

NCVS interviewers ask victims to explain their failure to report crimes to the police, but the unstructured responses, which were not obtained from all respondents, are of somewhat limited analytical usefulness. Juvenile victims explained their nonreporting in much the same ways as adults with only a few notable differences (see table 1). Juveniles cited "reported to another official" as a reason for not making a report to police more often than adults for both violent crime and theft. Juveniles were also more likely than adults to discount their violent victimizations as minor or "kid stuff," probably reflecting the popular perception that juvenile-on-juvenile violence is not criminal in nature. Interestingly, however, juveniles were no more likely than adults to say they thought the police would not take the incidents seriously nor were they more likely than adults to say they were afraid of reprisals.

Implications

Ultimately, various factors contribute to the underreporting of juvenile victimizations. Adolescents, developmentally concerned with personal autonomy, may resist the involvement of adults in their affairs, even when they involve crime victimization. This could be in part related to fears that youth will be blamed for participating in or for instigating their victimization. Certainly, the fact that juvenile victims often need the intercession of parents or other adults to make reports to police could also put a damper on reporting, not only because youth may be reluctant to involve parents, but also because it adds one more stage at which the process may be interrupted. Parents, for their part, may fear the negative effects on juveniles of involvement with police and other authorities, including the chance it might lead to reprisals by offenders. Juveniles and their parents may both be concerned that police and other authorities will not take juvenile victims seriously. Finally, there is a cultural predisposition, shared by parents, youth, and police, to view nonsexual assaults against juveniles as something other than crimes—rather as fights, scuffles, or child maltreatment—and therefore not suitable for police reporting.

Figure 5: Reporting of Crimes Against Juveniles by Victim Age: Theft (1995–96)



Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics. 1998. *National Crime Victimization Survey.* Computer file, fifth edition. Survey conducted by U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research.

Patterns in the data provide some perspective on the factors that influence the percentage of juveniles who report certain crimes. The crime of sexual assault against juveniles, in contrast to other violent crime, is reported to the police at about the same rate as for adults. This may be because sexual assault against juveniles is seen as comparatively more criminal or because victims and their families want to access services and information that either require or facilitate reporting. This suggests that reporting of other crimes might be increased if victims and families were encouraged to take them seriously, believed the authorities would also take them seriously, and realized some tangible benefit from reporting.

The finding that small-value thefts from juveniles have a comparatively high rate of reports to school authorities suggests, moreover, that the seriousness of the crime is not the sole factor determining the level of reporting. Even minor crimes may have high reporting levels in some contexts. In this case, school authorities may hear about small value thefts because they are perceived as interested and concerned or they are viewed as having the ability to recover the stolen item or bring the perpetrator to justice. Justice systems that are easy to access and respond well to juvenile concerns may elicit more reports.

Based on these patterns, police should consider taking the following steps to encourage juvenile reporting:

- Emphasize police interest in receiving reports from juveniles.
- Train and deploy more officers specializing in working with juvenile victims.
- Initiate and join in campaigns to increase awareness that various kinds of juvenile victimization are crimes.
- Try to undermine the youth code that makes reporting a sign of weakness or betrayal.
- Provide incentives to report, including information to help youth protect themselves from future victimization or from retaliation.
- Publicize existing youth-friendly staff and procedures, such as Children's Advocacy Centers.
- Publicize the availability of crime compensation funds for juvenile victims.
- Expedite and simplify the processing of crime compensation awards for juvenile victims.
- Make police more available at the places and times juvenile victimization typically occurs.

The justice system also needs to address the large number of incidents of juvenile victimization that elude police attention and are dealt with instead by other authorities—especially school officials. The school resource officer, a current policy innovation, is one attempt to better connect schools with the police that may help to promote increased reporting of juvenile victimization. The larger issue of how school authorities and the formal justice system should coordinate to effectively respond to juvenile crime victims will require much more discussion and research before it is resolved.

Table 1: Percentage of Incidents Not Reported to Police by "Most Important Reason Not Reported" for Juvenile and Adult Victims

	Violent Crimes		Thefts	
Reason for Not Reporting to Police	Juvenile*	Adult*	Juvenile*	Adult*
Reported to another official	22%	11%	29%	9%
Private or personal matter	17	23	7	5
Minor or unsuccessful crime	20	16	30	31
Child offender(s), "kid stuff"	7	1	2	1
Not clear it was a crime	4	3	1	1
Police couldn't do anything	1	5	9	19
Police wouldn't think it was important enough	3	6	4	8
Police wouldn't help for other reasons	1	4	1	3
Did not want to get offender in trouble with law	2	3	1	1
Afraid of reprisal	4	4	0	1
Other reason (not specified)	16	22	11	16
Don't know	3	1	3	2
No one reason more important than another	1	2	2	4

*Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding.

Note: Adult=18+ years; juvenile=12–17 years.

Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics. 1998. *National Crime Victimization Survey.* Computer file, fifth edition. Survey conducted by U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research.

Conclusion

Given the high rate of juvenile crime victimization, its underreporting should be considered an important problem to be addressed by law enforcement policies. It is not necessary to assume that all juvenile victimizations warrant police involvement, but the findings presented here strongly suggest that serious categories of juvenile victimization that should be coming to the attention of police and other authorities, are not. Juvenile justice professionals and service providers need to adopt practices that make it easier for juvenile victims to receive the benefits of the justice system.

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